

Church organ sparked conflict in Heyworth church

“The devil was completely knocked out at Heyworth this morning at 2 o’clock,” declared The Daily Leader of Bloomington on Feb. 9, 1891.

“Knocked out” was not the devil himself, mind you, but rather the Heyworth Christian Church organ.

Did you say organ? That’s right, for in the 19th century many Protestant churches and faiths were roiled by the introduction of instrumental music into worship services. In Heyworth, a village about 15 miles south of Bloomington, this debate reached a fiery denouement when several individuals carried the Christian Church organ outside and set it ablaze.

This controversy pitted traditionalists who favored more austere worship services patterned after the practices of early Christianity against modernizers wanting to liven things up with instrumental music and other “improvements.”

The Heyworth Christian Church was born out of the Restoration Movement of the 19th century that sought to unify all Christian denominations under one church. Central Illinois proved fertile ground for what’s also known as the Stone-Campbell Movement, named after its two leaders, Barton W. Stone and Thomas Campbell.

Other local denominations experienced “organ debates.” In 1855, the Methodist Church in Bloomington purchased a melodeon, a type of reed organ popular in the 19th century. This was apparently one of several issues (another being the practice of renting pews) that precipitated the split among Bloomington Methodists and the establishment of First and Grace Methodist respectively (these two churches then rejoined in the mid-20th century to form the Wesley United Methodist).

Opposition to organ music at the Christian Church in Bloomington led to one or more attempts to pitch the “devil” off the gallery and onto the pews. According to one source, several women in fact did succeed in smashing the organ to pieces.

Yet the division between traditionalists and modernizers was often more pronounced in the Restoration Movement. Alexander Campbell, for one, declared in the early 1850s that instrumental music during worship “would be as a cow bell in a concert” to the ears of all good Christians.

The Heyworth Christian Church dates to the winter of 1870-1871 when Restoration Movement evangelist J.S. Stagner staged what was, for all intents and purposes, a seven-week revival. Full immersion baptisms were held at Kickapoo Creek north of Heyworth, with worshippers having to cut through ice to get to the water.

By 1891, though, this was no backwoods primitive church. “The society membership is quite large and composed of a number of substantial and influential people,” it was noted at the time. Despite its relative affluence and influence, the Heyworth church remained one of a dwindling number of area holdouts when it came to instrumental music.

“Since its organization the saints and sinners have furnished the music by voice of mouth alone,” noted The Daily Leader of Bloomington in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek recap of the organ controversy. “No ungodly brazen horns or rasping fiddle or mournful ‘organette’ ever disgraced the portals of that sanctuary. The devil’s music could not desecrate the solemnity of that house of worship.”

Stone-Campbell Movement churches, especially those in the North, were certainly not impervious to the immense influences of a rapidly industrializing nation evermore interconnected and urban. By the late 1880s, for instance, a majority of Restoration churches made use of instrumental music in worship services.

Yet the debate wasn’t settled among members of this vibrant movement, as evident by Daniel Sommer’s 1889 “Address and Declaration,” delivered from Sand Creek, Shelby County, Ill. This conservative call to arms railed against the modernizing tide of organ music, padded pews and the like.

Although services at the Heyworth church remained music-free (save a cappella hymns), pressure began mounting within the congregation for change. “As the days and the years went by rising generations became zealous to do things as they are done in the cities,” continued The Leader. “The tiresome songs, unaccompanied by any instrument, was to them torture. They longed to listen to the whining of an organ.”

And indeed, by the early 1890s a majority of Heyworth Christian Church congregants expressed support for instrumental music during worship. Recognizing the change in attitudes, the church committee in early 1891 agreed to the purchase of a Kimball organ for about \$100 (the equivalent of more than \$2,600 today, adjusted for inflation) from J.T. Adams’ music store in downtown Bloomington.

With the purchase of the organ, some congregants, including two charter members, vowed to leave the church. The Leader noted that “certain ladies and gentlemen withdrew their names from the books and walked from the place while yet holy and untainted by sin of a church organ.”

The debate between pro- and anti-organ “factions” continued in the local press, even after the installation of the Heyworth Christian Church organ.

The long-simmering controversy reached a head the night / early morning of Feb. 8-9, 1891. It was at that time that at least two individuals gained entry into the church, dragged the organ out onto the street, stuffed its innards with straw, doused it in coal oil and set it afire. By the time neighbors were alerted to what had happened it was too late.

The organ, quipped The Leader, “no longer exists to serve his satanic majesty.”

On Feb. 10, the Christian Church paid J.T. Adams in full for the “cremated” organ and immediately placed an order for a second one. It’s not known if anyone was eventually arrested for the crime, and if so, if they were ever tried and sentenced.

The anti-organ folks fiercely denied they had anything whatsoever to do with the conflagration. And to their credit, they remained vocal in their anti-organ convictions, despite hostility emanating from certain corners.

On Feb. 16, a Hudson resident using the moniker “O.R. Gan,” wrote to The Leader declaring enough is enough. “It would be a great blessing to humanity if the Bloomington papers would choke off that miserable organ racket by not giving space to those that want to air their views,” announced the exasperated reader.

O.R. Gan’s worries were for naught. Heyworth soon quieted down, and so did things at the Christian Church. The installation of the new organ apparently proceeded without incident and it remained a part of worship service into the early 20th century. A Baldwin piano replaced the organ and was used in that capacity until 1952 when it was moved to the nursery. A Wurlitzer piano then took the place of the old Baldwin. Today, the melodious strains of a Wicks pipe organ accompanies services at Heyworth Christian Church.

Poet Will Carleton of Michigan addressed the church organ controversy in his 1873 collection “Farm Ballads.” The poem, the aptly titled “The New Church Organ,” details in a folksy vein one wary parishioner’s refusal to accept “bold, new-fangled ways.” It concludes:

And when the folks get up to sing—
Whene’er that time shall be—
I do not want no patent thing
A-squealin’ over me!